

LAFAYETTE.*

Among the galaxy of the immortals to whom Americans owe their cherished heritage of Independence and Nationality, two stars shine side by side, the highest, brightest and purest of all: the one is that of our noble, lofty and incomparable Washington, and the other, the heroic, chivalrous and high-minded Lafayette. Their names are forever united as American national demigods. So long as their memories shall continue to be recalled with reverence and their example to furnish heroic and spiritual inspiration to our youth, the soul and true spirit of American patriotism will survive. It is indeed highly praiseworthy and uplifting, doing honor alike to the illustrious dead and the grateful living, that we Americans, here in Philadelphia, at the very cradle of our independence and liberties, should, after the lapse of more than a century and a half, be still recalling and acclaiming the great debt that our country owes to the France of Louis XVI, and pre-eminently to the finest and

* Address of William D. Guthrie, President France-America Society of New York and Grand Officer of the French National Order of the Legion of Honor, at a celebration held in Philadelphia, May 23, 1934, in commemoration of the centenary of the death of Lafayette on May 20, 1834.

noblest of the knight-errants and crusaders who ever went forth from France romantically and unselfishly to relieve oppression, to redress wrongs, to battle and sacrifice that others might win freedom and independence.

The name of Gilbert Motier de Lafayette, Marquis in the French order of knighthood and chivalry, was destined to become inseparably associated with that of Washington and more familiar to the American people than that of any other actor in the American Revolution with the exception only of Washington. President John Quincy Adams officially recorded this historic truth when, in bidding farewell to Lafayette at Washington City, on September 7, 1825, he declared to him for all time as follows:

“We shall look upon you always as belonging to us, during the whole of our life, and as belonging to our children after us. You are ours by that more than patriotic self-devotion with which you flew to the aid of our fathers at the crisis of our fate; ours by that unshaken gratitude for your services which is a precious portion of our inheritance; ours by that tie of love, stronger than death, which has linked your name for the endless ages of time with the name of Washington.”

Young Lafayette belonged to an ancient and illustrious family that could trace its lineage back beyond the

year 1000. Members of this famous French family served in the Crusades; one of them fell at the battle of Poitiers; another was Marshal of France in the days of Charles VII, and many won distinction in their country's wars during the centuries that followed. The men of the family were renowned for their heroism, chivalry and high character, and the women for their virtues. Lafayette's grandmother was a Chavagnac, and a noble woman of exceptionally strong character and sound judgment, who was highly respected in all the neighborhood. His mother belonged to an illustrious family, and was distinguished for virtue and piety. His father, like most of his ancestors, served in the army, and was killed by a British cannon ball at the famous battle of Minden, August 1, 1759. Lafayette was born on September 6, 1757, two years before his father's death, and he inherited a large fortune from an uncle of his mother. In his seventeenth year he married Adrienne, daughter of the Duc d'Ayen. The latter, who later became Duc de Noailles, belonged to one of the greatest and most distinguished and powerful families among the French aristocracy. The women of the Lafayette and Noailles families were celebrated for elevation of character and high moral courage and steadfastness.

Surely, such lives and such examples bear rich, benefi-

cent and ennobling fruit. Both Lafayette and his wife were trained to lead honorable and upright lives, and they did so. It is true that he was somewhat affected by the philosophies and agnosticism of the Eighteenth Century, but his character remained unsullied, uncontaminated. His wife Adrienne was deeply pious, a lofty and saintly model of true French womanhood, and her life furnished an example of womanly fortitude and virtue seldom equaled and perhaps never excelled. Her religious faith and piety sustained her heroically through all the horrors and sufferings of the French Revolution, imprisonment in the dungeons of La Force and of Plessis, expecting death every hour, the death of her mother and grandmother and sister on the guillotine, and the cruel imprisonment of her husband in the Fortress of Olmutz in Austria for five years, where she and two of their daughters joined him and shared his captivity, his hardships and his suffering.

No figure in all our annals is more romantic or more inspiring than that of young Lafayette. There is no one connected in any way with our history whose memory should more deeply stir our spirit of romance, or who more fully incarnated the strange, fascinating, heroic, unselfish, patriotic principles of the age of chivalry that redeemed the dark ages, brought about the Renais-

sance, and saved christian civilization. That a young man of nineteen, noble and rich, married to a lovely and devoted woman, an officer in the King's army, prominent and sought after at the Court of Versailles, should leave all and disobey and defy the King, make himself an outlaw, run the risk of forfeiting his wealth and high position, and all out of sympathy for strangers struggling for liberty three thousand miles away, is quite unexampled in the history of chivalry. The cynical and material have suggested, as even Jefferson intimated, that Lafayette's controlling motive was the love of fame and popularity or what in our day would be called publicity; but any such view wholly misapprehends the fine and unselfish sensibility and exaltation of principle that actuated French chivalry from the days of the Crusades, and was the glory of France until the living spirit of its knighthood and chivalry was in large measure overshadowed amid the horrors, bloodshed and degradation of the French Revolution. That awful and mighty cataclysm was the deadly fruit of the materialism of so-called philosophers and the teachings of those "sophisters, economists, and calculators" whom Burke so scornfully denounced. It is quite true that Lafayette loved fame, glory and popularity, which he always valued highly; but that characteristic is a very fine one when it is an attribute of a great

and generous mind and of a high and pure character, seeking not merely to earn fame, glory and popularity, but to merit and deserve them. After reading many biographies, I can recall no instance in all his long life of many temptations and vicissitudes of fortune when ambition or love of fame, or glory, or popularity led Lafayette to do a dishonorable or a mean or a low act, to compromise with or sacrifice his principles, to wrong any one, friend or foe, for personal advantage or prestige, nor can I recall that he was ever untrue to his early conviction and guiding motive "that the human race was created to be free and that he was born to serve its cause." This French aristocrat, as has been well said, had more than his fair share of natural virtue, and this his romantic imagination turned into a religion, a religion of reason, goodness and unselfish service. Above all, notwithstanding misconceptions and errors of judgment, he was ever true to his high principles whether in success or failure, in prosperity or adversity, and singularly free from any spirit of political opportunism.

During the summer of 1775, Lafayette was stationed with his regiment at Metz. He was invited to a dinner party given in honor of the Duke of Gloucester, brother of the King of England, George III. The prince warmly sympathized with the American colonists, and his account

of their wrongs deeply stirred young Lafayette, who that very night determined to support the colonists with his sword and if need be with his life. From this determination he never swerved. Knowing that his wife and her very influential family would do everything in their power to prevent his going to America, he necessarily had to keep the project secret from her and them; and when at last he sailed in March, 1777, he did so in defiance of the wishes of his family and the French King, as well as of a *lettre de cachet* forbidding his departure, and with the probability that he would be outlawed and his entire fortune confiscated.

Let us never forget that when he thus sailed for our shores to offer his sword, his fortune and his life in our aid, there was nothing to touch the imagination of a knight or soldier through the glory of taking part in a winning cause. He tendered his services and volunteered his sacrifices in the darkest period of the American Revolution, and when it seemed to be tottering upon the brink of total defeat and collapse. Washington's army had recently been routed on Long Island, which had been abandoned, and this had been followed by the evacuation of the City of New York. The American army was becoming disheartened, demoralized and fast disintegrating. Then had come the defeat at White Plains with

the surrender at Fort Washington of a large part of the American army. It was in fact at the head of less than three thousand men that General Washington had retreated through New Jersey. His troops were poorly armed, almost without tents, blankets, or provisions, discouraged by constant reverses, many of them half-clad and barefooted in the cold of November and December, passing through a disaffected or despairing country, and pursued by a numerous, well-appointed and victorious British army.

Yet, it was at this critical and most unpromising and discouraging stage of the conflict that Lafayette determined to cross the Atlantic, risk capture by an English cruiser, join the Americans, and offer them his sword and, if need be, his fortune and his life. No wonder that our representatives in France, Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane, themselves then disheartened and almost in despair of success, endeavored to dissuade Lafayette from carrying out his hazardous, if not foolhardy, design. His reply to them was as follows:

“Now is precisely the moment to serve your cause; the more people are discouraged, the greater utility will result from my departure; and if you cannot furnish me with a vessel, I shall charter one at my own expense to convey your despatches and my person to the shores of America.”

I cannot tonight, for want of time, review his long and perilous voyage to the coast of South Carolina on board “La Victoire” and his trying and exhausting march northward through the jungle and wilderness to Philadelphia, where he arrived on July 27. There, he at once won the affection and admiration of the Americans and captured their hearts as no one else ever has. Brand Whitlock says in his fine biography: “The romantic appeal of his adventure, his defiance of the royal authority, his youth, his nobility, his fervor, and not least his wealth, put him head and shoulders above the mass of foreign adventurers who for one reason or another had offered their services to the United States. It was soon known, too, that he had become the special friend of Washington, the inaccessible, and that whatever Congress might think, the great Washington liked him.”

It was here in Philadelphia on August 1, 1777, that our truly great and immortal Washington first met Young Lafayette. The latter was then only nineteen years of age and Washington was forty-nine. The Commander-in-Chief of the American Army received the young French knight with a generous and most hospitable welcome, that made him at once and wholly at his ease. “There was an instant understanding between them, and the beginning of one of those rare and perfect friend-

ships that last for life.” Washington complimented Lafayette on the spirit he had shown and the sacrifices he had made for the American cause, told him he must treat the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief as his home, and that he would look upon him as one of his own “family”—as in the English fashion of those days he called his military staff. Lafayette thereupon became a Major-General in the American army attached to the person of General Washington.

Lafayette was always regarded by Washington with admiration and deep affection. At the battle of Brandywine, when Lafayette was wounded but nevertheless insisted on remaining on the battlefield in an heroic effort to rally the retreating American troops, Washington, deeply moved, peremptorily ordered him to retire and have his wound dressed, and commanded the surgeons to “treat him as though he were my son.” And so he affectionately regarded Lafayette until the end of his life.

Others will recount to you the really important service that Lafayette rendered in the American army during the four eventful years from 1777 to Yorktown, and his activities in the decisive campaign in Virginia which ended in the surrender of Lord Cornwallis and the British army on October 19, 1781, after a siege in which Lafayette at the head of American troops played a glori-

ous part in the very centre of the stage under the loving eye of Washington. But I want to emphasize two of his still more conspicuous and effective accomplishments in the American cause.

In truth, of all the great services rendered by Lafayette on the battlefields of our War of the Revolution, notable and important as they really were, none can equal in beneficial results, first, the great and far-reaching moral effect produced upon French public opinion and the national enthusiasm created throughout France by his example and voyage in March, 1777, which within less than a year brought about favorable action on the part of the French King and resulted in the Treaty of Alliance of February 6, 1778, and, secondly, Lafayette's visit to France in 1779, when he persuaded the King's government to send to America a French army under Rochambeau and a fleet of French ships of war under de Grasse. Had this not then been done, the American cause would have been hopeless. No wonder that this decisive result of the visit of 1779 earned for Lafayette the title of "The Savior of the Country," and even brought from our representative in Paris, the distrustful and undemonstrative John Adams, the high commendation, which, however, did Lafayette much less than justice, that: "The Marquis de Lafayette is going to Boston on a

frigate and surely he wants no recommendation of mine; his own merit and fame are enough. He has been the same friend to us here that he was in America."

It is quite proverbial to assert that republics are ungrateful. Yet, this is surely not true of the American Republic, or of our own generation. One of the finest pages of history was written last Sunday, May 20, by President Roosevelt and the Congress of the United States in the splendid official celebration in Washington commemorating the centenary of the death of Lafayette. Equally fine and inspiring was the page written one hundred years ago, in 1834, when President Andrew Jackson, on hearing of the death of Lafayette, ordered, on behalf of the American people, "that the same honors be rendered upon this occasion at the different military and naval stations as were observed upon the decease of Washington, the Father of his country, and [Lafayette's] contemporary in arms," and when the officers of the American army and navy were ordered to wear brassards of crêpe for six months, our national administration went into mourning, and the Halls of Congress were hung in black until the end of the then pending session. Another very fine page is being written by you tonight, appropriately here in Philadelphia, and likewise being written this year elsewhere throughout the entire country by the

numerous public celebrations in grateful memory for Lafayette's unique and ever-to-be-remembered services to our country in its day of greatest need.

Whilst serving in our cause, Lafayette was sent by Washington to meet a hostile Mohawk Chief in council, for the purpose of negotiating and, if possible, concluding a treaty of peace with the Mohawk tribe. On the successful outcome of the council, the Indian Chief is reported to have said among other things to Lafayette:

“We have now returned that thou mayest find in us good and faithful children. We rejoice to hear thy voice among us. It seems that the Great Spirit has directed thy footsteps to this council of friendship to smoke the calumet of peace and fellowship with thy long-lost children.”

We, likewise, tonight, may well believe that the Great Spirit directed Lafayette's steps in his coming to the help of the American cause in 1777. If the spirit of Washington be with us tonight, and I am quite prepared devoutly and reverently to entertain that inspiring faith, I know that he heartily approves this celebration in honor of his beloved Lafayette, that he is extending to us his benediction, and that he would want our sentiment towards Lafayette's memory to endure and flourish as it ever has among our best traditions, and to

blossom evermore into the most beautiful spiritual flower in our national garden, the Fleur-de-lis of France grafted on the hardy and perennial flower of eternal American gratitude.

Philadelphia, May 23, 1934.

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* The sources of the above address are: "The Life of the Marquis de Lafayette," by R. C. Headley (1903); "France in the American Revolution," by James Buck Perkins (1911); "The Spirit of Lafayette," by James Mott Hallowell (1918); "The United States and France—Some Opinions on International Gratitude," compiled by James Brown Scott (1926); "Our Debt to France," compiled by W. Lanier Washington (1926); "Lafayette," by Brand Whitlock (1930); "Young Lafayette," by Jeanette Eaton (1932), and "Lafayette—A Revolutionary Gentleman," by Michael de la Bedoyere (1934).

